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Paper No. 9

OBLON, SPIVAK, MCCLELLAND MAIER & NEUSTADT, L.L.P.
1940 DUKE STREET
ALEXANDRIA, VA 22314

MAILED

DEC 20 2010

OFFICE OF PETITIONS

DECISION ON PETITION

In re Patent No. 6,297,407
Issue Date: 10/02/2001
Application No. 09/744,437
Filed: 01/24/2001
Title: METHOD FOR PRODUCING
ALKYNE DIOLS

This is a decision on the "PETITION UNDER 37 C.F.R. § 1.378(B) TO ACCEPT AN UNAVOIDABLY DELAYED PAYMENT OF MAINTENANCE FEE IN EXPIRED PATENT TO REINSTATE PATENT" filed May 24, 2010.

The petition is **dismissed**.

If reconsideration of this decision is desired, a petition for reconsideration under 37 CFR 1.378(e) must be filed within TWO (2) MONTHS from the mail date of this decision. No extension of this two-month time limit can be granted under 37 CFR 1.136(a) or (b). Any such petition for reconsideration must be accompanied by the petition fee of \$400.00 as set forth in 37 CFR 1.17(f). The petition for reconsideration should include an exhaustive attempt to provide the lacking item(s) noted below because the Director will not undertake any further reconsideration or review of the matter after a decision on the petition for reconsideration.

The patent issued on October 2, 2001. The first maintenance fee could have been paid during the period from Monday, October 4, 2004 through Monday, April 4, 2005, or with a surcharge during the period from Tuesday, April 5, 2005 through Monday, October 3, 2005. Accordingly, this patent expired on October 3, 2005, for failure to timely remit the maintenance fee.

On May 24, 2010, petitioners filed the present petition accompanied by the maintenance fee and surcharge payment and the Declaration of Dr. Anke Jacobs, Senior Patent Counsel of BASF SE.

It appears that petitioners are alleging that the delay resulted from a docketing error on the part of an employee in the performance of a clerical function.

The Director may accept the payment of any maintenance fee due on a patent after expiration of the patent if, upon petition, the delay in payment of the maintenance fee is shown to the satisfaction of the Director to have been unavoidable and if the surcharge required by § 1.20(i) is paid as a condition of accepting payment of the maintenance fee. 37 CFR 1.378(a).

A grantable petition to accept a delayed maintenance fee payment under 37 CFR 1.378(b) must include the following:

- (1) the required maintenance fee set forth in § 1.20(e) through (g);
- (2) the surcharge set forth in § 1.20(i)(1); and
- (3) a showing that the delay was unavoidable since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent. The showing must enumerate the steps taken to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee, the date and the manner in which patentee became aware of the expiration of the patent, and the steps taken to file the petition promptly.

This petition lacks requirement (3).

Acceptance of a late maintenance fee under the unavoidable delay standard is considered under the same standard for reviving an abandoned application under 35 U.S.C. § 133. This is a very stringent standard. Decisions on reviving abandoned applications on the basis of "unavoidable" delay have adopted the reasonably prudent person standard in determining if the delay was unavoidable:

The word 'unavoidable' . . . is applicable to ordinary human affairs, and requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used and observed by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business. It permits them in the exercise of this care to rely upon the ordinary and trustworthy agencies of mail and telegraph, worthy and reliable employees, and such other means and instrumentalities as are usually employed in such important business. If unexpectedly, or through the unforeseen fault or imperfection of these agencies and instrumentalities, there occurs a failure, it may properly be said to be unavoidable, all other conditions of promptness in its rectification being present.

In re Mattullath, 38 App. D.C. 497, 514-15 (1912) (quoting Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 31, 32-33 (1887); see also Winkler v. Ladd, 221 F. Supp. 550, 552, 138 USPQ 666, 667-68 (D.D.C. 1963), aff'd, 143 USPQ 172 (D.C. Cir. 1963); Ex parte Henrich, 1913 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 139, 141 (1913).

In addition, decisions on revival are made on a "case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account." Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982). A petition cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of establishing that the delay was "unavoidable." Haines v. Quigg, 673 F. Supp. 314, 316-17, 5 USPQ2d 1130, 1131-32 (N.D. Ind. 1987). Moreover, a patentee's lack of knowledge of the need to pay the maintenance fee and the failure to receive the Maintenance Fee Reminder do not constitute unavoidable delay. See Patent No. 4,409,763, 7 USPQ2d 1798 (Comm'r Pat. 1988).

As 35 U.S.C. 41(b) requires the payment of fees at specified intervals to maintain a patent in force, rather than some response to a specific action by the Office under 35 U.S.C. 133, a reasonably prudent person in the exercise of due care and diligence would have taken steps to ensure the timely payment of such maintenance fees. Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 609, 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1788 (Fed. Cir. 1995). That is, an adequate showing that the delay in payment of the maintenance fee at issue was "unavoidable" within the meaning of 35 U.S.C. 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) requires a showing of the steps taken to ensure the timely payment of the maintenance fees for this patent. *Id.* Thus, where the record fails to disclose that the patentee took reasonable steps, or discloses that the patentee took no steps, to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee, 35 U.S.C. 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) preclude acceptance of the delayed payment of the maintenance fee under 37 CFR 1.378(b).

In determining whether the delay in paying a maintenance fee was unavoidable, one looks to whether the party responsible for payment of the maintenance fee exercised the due care of a reasonably prudent person. Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 608-609, 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1787 (Fed. Cir. 1995). The patent owner at the time of the expiration of the patent is ultimately the person responsible to ensure the timely payment of the maintenance fees. The patent owner may engage another to track and/or pay the maintenance fees; however, merely engaging another does not relieve the patent owner from his obligation to take appropriate steps to ensure the timely payment of such maintenance fees. See California Medical Prods. v. Tecnol Medical Prods., 921 F. Supp. 1219, 1259 (D. Del. 1995). The USPTO must rely on the actions or inactions of duly authorized and voluntarily chosen representatives of an applicant, and an applicant is bound by the consequences of those actions or inactions. Link v. Wabash, 370 U.S. 626, 633-34 (1962); Huston v. Ladner, 973 F.2d 1564, 1567, 23 USPQ2d 1910, 1913 (Fed. Cir. 1992). Specifically, delay caused by the actions or inactions of a voluntarily chosen representative does not constitute unavoidable delay within the meaning of 35 U.S.C. 133. Haines v. Quigg, 673 F. Supp. 314, 5 USPQ2d 1130 (D. Ind. 1987).

The Office notes that an error in a docketing system could possibly result in a finding that a delay in payment of the maintenance fee was unavoidable if it were shown that reasonable care was exercised in designing and operating the system and that petitioner took reasonable steps to make certain that the patent was entered into the system to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fees.

A delay resulting from an error (e.g., a docketing error) on the part of an employee in the performance of a clerical function may provide the basis for a showing of "unavoidable" delay, provided it is shown that:

- (1) the error was the cause of the delay at issue;
- (2) there was in place a business routine for performing the clerical function that could reasonably be relied upon to avoid errors in its performance;
- (3) and the employee was sufficiently trained and experienced with regard to the function and routine for its performance that reliance upon such employee represented the exercise of due care.

See MPEP 711.03(c)(III)(C)(2).

An adequate showing requires:

- (A) Statements by all persons with direct knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the delay, setting forth the facts as they know them.
- (B) Petitioners must supply a thorough explanation of the docketing and call-up system in use and must identify the type of records kept and the person responsible for the maintenance of the system. This showing must include copies of mail ledgers, docket sheets, file wrappers and such other records as may exist which would substantiate an error in docketing, and include an indication as to why the system failed to provide adequate notice that a reply was due.
- (C) Petitioners must supply information regarding the training provided to the personnel responsible for the docketing error, degree of supervision of their work, examples of other work functions carried out, and checks on the described work which were used to assure proper execution of assigned tasks.

In his Declaration, Dr. Anke Jacobs states:

On April 23, 2010, ISENBRUCK sent an email to OBLON inquiring into the status of U.S. 6,297,407, noting that the USPTO listed the patent as expired but that BASF SE's internal records showed U.S. 6,297,407 as alive and a pending application so that no annuities have to be paid.

On April 28, 2010, OBLON informed ISENBRUCK that NOVAK had informed OBLON on March 20, 2010, that the status of U.S. 6,297,407 was "Patent Expired."

On May 5, 2010, BASF SE sent a letter to OBLON inquiring as to the possible revival of U.S. 6,297,407, and indicating that BASF SE was unaware that the electronic database had not indicated U.S. Application No 09/744,437 as a granted case in the records but

still as a pending application. Therefore the service provider was not informed to pay any maintenance fees for U.S. 6,297,407. It was only at that point that BASF SE became aware of the expiration of the above-identified patent due to failure to pay the first and second maintenance fee.

Petition dated 05/24/10, p. 2.

It does not appear that Dr. Jacobs committed the clerical error or has firsthand knowledge of the cause of the error in entering the information into the electronic database. Moreover, Dr. Jacobs did not identify the person who committed the clerical error that ultimately resulted in the failure to pay the maintenance fee in a timely manner. Dr. Jacobs did not submit information regarding the training provided to the personnel responsible for the docketing error, the degree of supervision of their work, examples of other work functions carried out, and checks on the described work that were used to assure proper execution of assigned tasks. Dr. Jacobs did not indicate whether it was reasonable to rely on those persons to perform their duties in light of their level of training and experience. Moreover, petitioners did not provide any statements from the personnel who were responsible for the docketing error or explain what steps were taken to obtain such statements. Lastly, neither Dr. Jacobs nor petitioners submitted copies of any records that may exist that would substantiate a clerical error.

In view of the above, the petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b) is dismissed.

Petitioners should note that if this petition is not renewed, or if renewed and not granted, then the maintenance fee and post-expiration surcharge are refundable. The \$400.00 petition fee for seeking further reconsideration is not refundable. Any request for refund should be in writing to the following address:

Mail Stop 16
Director of the US Patent and Trademark Office
PO Box 1450
Alexandria, VA 22313-1450

A copy of this decision should accompany any request for a refund.

The file does not indicate a change of address has been submitted, although the address given on the petition differs from the address of record. If appropriate, a change of fee address (form PTO/SB/47) and a request for customer number (form PTO/SB/125) should be filed in accordance with Manual of Patent Examining Procedure, section 2540. A copy of this decision is being mailed to the address on the petition. However, the Office will mail all future correspondence solely to the address of record.

Further correspondence with respect to this matter should be addressed as follows:

By mail: Mail Stop Petition
Commissioner for Patents

P.O. Box 1450
Alexandria, VA 22313-1450

By FAX: (571) 273-8300
Attn: Office of Petitions

By hand: Customer Service Window
Randolph Building
401 Dulany Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

Correspondence may also be submitted via the Electronic Filing System of the USPTO.

Telephone inquiries concerning this matter may be directed to the undersigned at (571) 272-3211.

Christina Tartera Donnell

Christina Tartera Donnell
Senior Petitions Attorney
Office of Petitions

Cc: NOVAK DRUCE DELUCA + QUIGG LLP
300 NEW JERSEY AVENUE NW
FIFTH FLOOR
WASHINGTON DC 20001